



Decolonizing theology

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Abstract

In this essay, the author aims to deal with two questions, namely (1) how decolonized is South African theology? And if there is a sense that South African theology needs to be decolonized, then the second question is (2) how should this be done? The first is raised as an interrogative starting-point, and is therefore not conclusive, since the author is admittedly, not fully versed in South African theology. Thus, the main body of the work is concerned with the second question, and thus proposes a three-stage method for decolonizing theology in South Africa. The first involves ‘provincializing’ the Western context as a background for doing theology in the Global South. The second concerns the ‘translation’ of concepts into the differing contexts where theology is produced, and the third is related to the question of ‘affirmation’, in the sense of positively acknowledging culture as being reflective of the diversity of people groups. The author closes with some reflections on theological task today, specifically as this relates to mission, the definition of tradition, and its connection to the academy.

Key words

Decolonization; South African theology; Fanon; Chakrabarty

When John de Gruchy invited me to give this lecture¹ and asked for a proposed title, I wrote: ‘Doing Theology in South Africa’. My idea was to talk about the land and its history and how those two characteristics of place determine theology done with respect to them. It was to articulate a theology of belonging and dwelling that I still wish to return to. However, John sharpened that title and turned it into a considerable challenge – for me: ‘Decolonizing Theology’. I accepted the challenge; but that made it

1 [This essay is a text for a lecture given at the Sixth Annual Steve De Gruchy Memorial Lecture held at Rondebosch United Church on the 4th of April 2017. – Ed.]

no less daunting when coming to research and write this lecture. This is dangerous stuff and if my respondent² were to describe the effort as ‘totally presumptuous’ or ‘fatuously ignorant’, then I could only nod my head. It is presumptuous – on at least three counts.

First, it is presumptuous because I am part of the empire that colonized and still does colonize. There are few colonizing countries in the world with a worse reputation for coercive imposing than Britain. In addition, if we shift the focus from Britain to the West more generally, then in the hands of Western leaders are the IMF, the World Bank and the international development funds. All your futures for national development are outworkings of a Western imagination, because the engine driving the global economy is Western capitalism. Furthermore, I am an Anglican priest and so a purveyor of what S. E. K Mqhayi called ‘the false gods of the white man’³ – bringing Christianity in one of its splintered Protestant forms to this country, for better or worse. I am then a signed up member of a missionizing religion.

Secondly, it is presumptuous because I am an Englishman using my own language – and language is the bearer not just of ideas and representations, but also social relations. It is a key tool in national productivity of all kinds (from the workings of parliament to the construction of bridges). Language is how culture becomes embedded and evolves. It shapes the way we think and what we can think; the way we perceive and experience the world and the way we *can* perceive and experience the world. The Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, in his highly perceptive book *Decolonizing the Mind*, writes concerning colonialist imposition: ‘its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.’⁴ I am aware, and thankful, that in South Africa several languages are spoken daily, not just English. However, the present geopolitical climate is not

2 [The respondent was Teddy Sakupapa from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) – Ed.]

3 Cited in Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, but analytically explored in Philip Holden, *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modern Masculinity and the Nation State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 46.

4 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987), p. 16.

kind to any number of languages, and there is a politics at play here; most notably around Afrikaans. However, I am also aware that my language, not just in the past but even more importantly today, is a hegemonic one; a bearer of imperial values (moral, intellectual and aesthetic).

Thirdly, and possibly most conclusively, although I have been coming here for over twenty years I remain fairly ignorant – ignorant of South African history, the history of its peoples; the history of negotiating the foreigner that goes back almost 600 years. I am most ignorant of the later Black theologians who carried on that negotiation since at least in the time of James Read and John Philips in the early nineteenth century.⁵

So given all that why did I accept John's challenge? Well in part, through the love I have for him, Isobel and their family; in part, though I didn't know Steve, I know their continuing love for Steve; in part because I wanted to honour their trust in me and offer what I might offer not because I see you need my offering, but because I've been asked to do it; and in part because of Australia ...

A few years ago, I was giving a series of lectures at the biannual conference of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Society. We were in Fremantle, close to Perth. I picked up from talking to people of all ages from graduate students to academics that connections with Europe were lifelines for their theology, for their sense of intellectual prowess, for their sense even of being part of the discipline. Having degrees from Europe, having studied in Europe, applying to study in Europe, visiting Europe were all key to their self-esteem; their sense of being an academic or aspiring to be an academic on the international scene. A 'proper' education and public display of that education, in theology *had to have* a Western imprimatur. Paper after paper, dissertation after dissertation, book after book, I listened to or heard about dealt with or referenced or developed ideas on the basis of significant theologians and philosophers from the European and Anglo-American tradition. Where they spoke about

5 There are some resources here, and there needs to be much more (or more that I can get hold of that are widely disseminated). See Charles Villa-Vicencio and Peter Grassow *Christianity and the Colonisation of Africa: A Documented History*. Volume One. (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2009) and John de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa: A Documented History*. Volume Two. (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2009).

something distinctively Australian they were methodologically closer to cultural studies; but theologically and philosophically it was the German or the French or the American or the British (and just occasionally the Latin American) voices they were citing, analysing, comparing, contrasting and in debate with. Interestingly and significantly, I find very few Western theologians referring to theologians in Australia with anything like the same reverence; because ‘they’ do not sense any need to know about Australian theological scholarship. In addition, that signals not only the need for Australia to develop its own theological outlook, but, more importantly, that the colonial mind-set is as much a Western problem as a problem in the erstwhile colonies. The decolonization of theology, then, is not only a project to be undertaken by the former colonies; just as feminist or queer thinking is not only for women or gays. Hegemonic power has to be critical of its hegemony – in the name of justice. There are asymmetries of knowledge and ignorance here that need to be addressed – or at least foregrounded. In addition, international universities (like Oxford), or universities that wish to become international, are complicit in maintaining this hegemony in the social sciences and humanities. I will be returning to this. It is different in research centres for medicine, physics, biology etc.

After four days, and having got to know one of my hosts well I ventured a very generalizing observation: ‘It seems to me,’ I said, ‘most Australians live around the edges of this country so they can leave it whenever possible to go to Europe or the States.’ I cannot recall what her reply was, but I followed it up with a question: ‘Where is the *Australian* theology being done? How does the theology done here hook up to the land, its languages, and its spiritual and material histories?’ It seemed to me that many of the people at the conference felt they were still in some ‘outpost’, on some ‘frontier’, in some ‘waiting room’, with the real action in the West. Yet, at the same time, they were immensely proud of being Australian.

Now it’s a long time since Australia was a colony; but the colonized imagination, the colonized mentality seemed to me – as an outsider – still very strong. In addition, I do not think that is because they have yet to throw off the status as a commonwealth or erase the cultural presence of the Queen. It is much deeper than that. Therefore, the question I am posing tonight (and I really do not know the answer because, overall, the universities I have visited and have associations in this country with are few

and possibly *not* representative) – but the question I am posing is ‘Where is the *South African* theology being done?’

Let me put this a little more sharply. When anyone writes they have a public in mind. Only then can they communicate. Even doctoral students writing their dissertations and hoping eventually to publish them write with more than their supervisors and their potential examiners in mind. They are writing for an imaginary community to which they aspire to belong or do belong. They may even imagine their readership and the acclaim for the work they desire for ‘peers’ or ‘would-be peers’. So, more sharply, for whom are the professional theologians writing? For whom are their theological reflections composed? Because under colonialism, as Fanon, understood, ‘the native intellectual gives proof that he [or she] has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His [or her] writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. His [or] her aspiration is European [or, more generally, Western] and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the [theological] literature of the mother country.’⁶ For Fanon, this is a period in a national self-understanding ‘of unqualified assimilation.’⁷

To be sure, I’m speaking now to professional theologians and I am Protestant enough to believe enthusiastically in the ‘priesthood of all believers’ and, therefore, that we are all theologians – because we are all called not just to have faith but to seek an understanding of that faith such that we can give an account of the hope that is within us in Jesus Christ. However, the theology we teach is filtered down (or filtered out) by the preachers and priests we educate; at least among the more elite intellectuals. That filtering down takes various institutional forms unless the ‘congregation’ is distinct and isolated from those institutions – like national assemblies, denominational briefing documents, specific policies or directives with regards to ‘mission’, for example. It informs not just the reading of Scripture by both cleric and lay, but also its interpretation. Therefore, the faith of the very least Christian, valiantly trying to make sense of what they believe in and through their experience of the world, is potentially affected by the

6 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 178–179.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

more abstract and reflective theology being produced by the educators for the laity. I may be wrong. South Africa may be more like Britain where the schooling in theology of those ordained or about to be ordained in the church is often more a matter of getting through the qualification hoops. The theology in the churches then bears very little relation to what the professional theologian produces. But even then, the filtering out leaves residuums of a past training and its emphases. If students are filtering out the theology, they have learnt about from the theology they are practicing and preaching, that credibility gap between what goes on in the academy and what goes on in the churches needs to be examined. The examination may indeed answer my question: 'Where is the South African theology being done?' Until that question is answered then the questions about how helpful or hindering such theology is cannot be answered with any precision. As a shorthand: theology is helpful when it brings a healing, liberation that is not fearful of engagement with the environments within which it is working; adversely, theology is a hindrance when it is oppressive, hegemonic and fearful of engagements with the environments within which it is working. Either way, where theology is being done, whether through colonial assimilation or being authentically rooted in the land, its people, its languages, its spiritual and material histories, *there* Christian mind-sets are being formed.

Therefore, I have set out my first question: how decolonized is South African theology? I want to proceed now to my second question. If, in giving me this title to lecture on, there is a sense that South African theology needs to decolonized, then my second question is how should this be done? Let me sketch an answer. It comes in three stages.

The first stage, which I name after the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty on Indian decolonization, is *Provincializing Europe*.⁸ We will leave aside the US now – because the globalization of the culture of the US is overwhelming, but its empire is economic with respect to South Africa, not geopolitical and historical. Chakrabarty is part of the *Subaltern Studies* group examining the other side of the story of modernity. He views modernity as a Western narrative and Europe as 'an imaginary figure that remains

8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

deeply embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity in South Asia.⁹ His work comes out of his own experience of the differences in South Asia that do not fit within and have been rendered invisible by the way modernity is written into the way research in the social sciences and the humanities is conducted.

Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history. One simply cannot think of political modernity without these.¹⁰

He is not trying to overthrow such concepts. He is consciously writing from within this inheritance and recognizes his own complicity with Western conceptual models and methods, and its key thinkers. However, he critiques their universalism and their secularism – that ‘the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time’¹¹ and the ‘entelechy of universal reason.’¹² He advocates a non-European modernity; a modernity viewed from the margins that adequately pays attention to South Asia’s own histories and traditions of thought.

Provincializing Europe is important for diminishing the power of the idol in our own heads; and I say that as a European because *we* have to stop pretending to be a world-player. As an idol, it has to be recognized, Chakrabarty asserts, as an ‘imaginary figure’. Therefore, to provincialize Europe is not only to call into question the sense of having to emulate; it is to deconstruct some of the mythology forming this imaginary entity. And in doing that then the identity of contemporary South Africa is problematized; it is seen less in terms of a “catch-up” nation state situating itself among the older (and erstwhile colonizing) nation states of Europe, and more in terms of its own collective memories and heterogeneity. Most

9 Ibid., p. 4.

10 Ibid..

11 Ibid., p. 16.

12 Ibid., p. 29.

cultural emulation of Europe in Africa is envy arising from a sense of being inferior. As Frantz Fanon notes over sixty years ago, the colonial source of this inferiority breeds pathologies – anger, shame, revenge. He calls them ‘anomalies of affect’.¹³ These pathologies are particularly misplaced with respect to theological studies, because Europe did not invent theology – Jewish, Christian or Islamic. It was the translator, transmitter and interpreter for the theology already established in sacred texts and other languages. For many centuries, and the famous ecumenical councils are indicative of this, a distinction was made (and still is made by the Orthodox Church) between Christian theology of the West and Christian theology of the East. If the West became increasingly hegemonic, the basis for that development was historical. It was not a matter of cultural superiority. The difference was linguistic (Greek and Latin); ethnic, economic and political – social, cultural and even ecclesial structures in Alexandria were not the same as those in Rome. Western theology *became* hegemonic.

Today, Europe is tired and its power declining. It has been at death’s door several times in the twentieth century. During the struggle, and then in the independence of Algeria, Fanon was already pointing out that Europe was profoundly mired in its own post Second World War problems – far too mired to solve North African problems. In 1977 Gadamer could already state that Europe ‘since 1914 has become provincialized.’¹⁴ The European Community restored it economically and politically; gaining a great deal of its ability to punch above its weight from the Cold War and the NATO alliance. The Cold War now is different and the future of NATO is insecure. Today, that united Europe faces major economic troubles, with some countries to the south having high youth unemployment. It has difficulties about where to draw its own boundaries – with a queue for future membership that includes Turkey. It has an ageing population with a decline in birth-rates among its indigenous peoples. It finally has all the conflicts concerning migration and the free movement of peoples across its collective territories. In addition, Britain going it alone is fraught with its own difficulties. The main advantage of Brexit, I feel, is the stimulus it has given and *will* give to stop its citizens being depoliticized consumers

13 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 3.

14 Cited by Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 1.

and provoke us into realizing we have to become responsible nation-builders. Not nationalists – goodness, Europe has gone through that nightmare! No doubt, the European Union will bounce back, reform its entrenched ways of doing things, and replenish its reputation. However, as a global superpower its days are over – and have been over for quite some time. Its cultural achievements have been great, but history will judge its political achievements harshly, I think. In addition, I doubt its creation of Enlightenment universals will guarantee it a dominant place in world-culture in the future. After all, as the African colonies became increasingly aware – the West's vast belief in and promotion of human rights and the sacred dignity of the individual did not prevent their inhuman activities elsewhere in the world.

Closer to home, with the discipline of theology and philosophy: after two centuries, Germany is no longer the intellectual powerhouse for theological and philosophical thinking; nor is France the powerhouse for post Second World War radical thinking and critical theory. They cannot speak universally. In fact, the attempt to speak universally leads to fracture and further fracture until we are back with the local and the embodiment of the particular. We are back with why place matters (land, histories, languages) – in every sense of that word 'matters'. Feminism led to womanism, led to black women's studies, Latina studies, and the uncoupling of 'white' from its invisible hegemony. When Serene Jones, the President of Union Seminary in New York, came here a few years back one of her observations in a private conversation was that black women in New York are not the same in attitude and behaviour as the black women she was meeting in South Africa. We tried to tease out some of the differences over the time of her stay. Black women are more confident here – was one of her conclusions; maybe, returning to Fanon, less pathologized. Being Black, or being White, or being Coloured are not the same across the world; they are each caught up in different social and economic hierarchies, class, gender and caste systems, and histories of domination or oppression and difference. Sociality is not the same. The meaning and esteem given to hyper individualism and the nuclear family in the States and Europe, for example, is not replicable here. The land is far larger, the climate variegated, and living is precarious and isolated in certain areas. These factors create particular forms of social bonding, character formation, values and priorities. Western social

atomism has generated deep problems and pathologies of its own; including a vast depoliticization. It should not be replicated.

The same has to be said for certain theological categories: the concepts we use and the connections we make through those concepts – the very *theologies* we construct, play out differently in different cultures and languages. Let me take one small example – though I think I could make a similar case for our Christologies, soteriologies, ecclesiologies, pneumatologies, notions of sin, repentance and theological anthropologies. However, let me take one example. The doctrine of justification by faith was one of the foundations of the Protestant imagination. It was nurtured by a change in the legal system as feudalism started to collapse with the growth of urban culture in the late Mediaeval and Renaissance period. It took hold of a phrase by St. Paul, and read its own new legal and law-court trends into that phrase¹⁵ – a phrase that could never bear that interpretation for Paul and the Graeco-Roman culture he inhabited. It did this in a way, earlier: Anselm had erected his own doctrine of the atonement upon feudal-based political sovereignty. If it is used today, propounded by theologians today, it is centuries out of date unless it is radically rethought and reimagined. Melanchthon's definition of the doctrine cannot hold; it lacks credibility in the cultures we inhabit. At best it is a metaphor – one of several used for what salvation means and how that salvation is participated in throughout the New Testament – and we have to find ways to retranslate and reinterpret this metaphor. There was no concept in Luther and Melanchthon's time of 'equality before the law'. Indeed, there were only the rudiments of secular legal procedure, and a great deal of lawlessness and lynching. Furthermore, since each national legal system is different in practice and context, likewise access to the justice of that system, likewise conceptions of how just that system actually is (and for whom) – then any theological re-appropriation of the Pauline phrase 'justification by faith' is also going to be different. If that model of salvation, and its relation to sin, repentance and sanctification, is still central (which I doubt, though I know others would disagree) – then there is a South African reading of those concepts and the theological connections

15 Carl Schmitt talked about sociology of legal concepts, but we might talk also about a sociology of theological concepts like atonement and justification by faith. See Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

made on its basis. My Anglo-American account of the doctrine (and the coupling there is problematic) will not work here. My account may offer suggestions for imaginative and creative thinking; I hope it would do that. However, the concepts and the connections will be translated differently – even where the same language (English) is being used. In addition, this is a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic country – I will come back to that.

Second step in decolonizing theology is, once more, a mode of translation, because we can learn from traditions of theological thinking – Eastern and Western – but we need to inhabit them in the material cultures as we live, breathe and experience them. Fanon viewed the second step – the first for him being colonial emulation and assimilation – as contestation.

Let us presuppose that being a professional theologian is not about finding your ranking on an international stage and therefore being in competition with those already perched high up there because they were educated or teach at Yale or Heidelberg, Oxford, Paris or Rome. I will say something about how difficult that is in our present university systems later. However, let us presuppose being a professional theologian is not even primarily about gaining a reputation for erudition and expertise; one's work being read by those in the traditional powerhouses for theological education who are or should be impressed by it. Rather, let's presuppose that being a theologian is to be trained in the various parts of theological enquiry to serve in his or her generation in an understanding of the faith that is being lived and practiced; to help, through prayer, discernment, study, discussion and contestation, understand the work of God as three and one in the redemption of the world in all its busyness today. Let us presuppose it is about struggling alongside others to be attuned to the work of Christ in and beyond the church today; being taught and led by the Holy Spirit what the gospel is today – and acting upon it in teaching and writing. In sum, that being a professional theologian is a response to a call not a career choice; and its ambition is for wisdom not just knowledge.

If we presuppose this, then we start to understand the theological task as trying to make sense of what God means, what salvation means, what the kingdom means, what the church means, what justice, beauty, goodness, forgiveness, mercy, and love all mean today, in our contexts. Moreover, it needs to be 'in our contexts' because that is where the living and materialities of our existence lies. That is not an invitation to cultural relativism; a

language can be shared across particularities. However, the white man's colonial Gospel is not your gospel; even if some of us are white. In our contexts and in our times theologians are not just adding our footnotes to theologians of the past or even elaborating justifications for *our* faith, our denominational faith. We're involved in creating an understanding for those of the faith seeking understanding; and the task is fundamentally existential – it's about making sense of life and of living well, behaving better; or it is about nothing at all. In addition, that living and behaving is not about isolated, sinless individuals, but about communities with histories and memories and commonwealths of well-being that take in the whole of creation. That living well and behaving better *is* the witness and testimony to God's glory; the God with us and the Kingdom of God among us.

So we learn: from reading and engaging the Scriptures (which are not as homogenous as is frequently believed), from the social and cultural life in which we are immersed, and from past examples of those who have reflected theologically before us. Two of those examples will remain central, even foundational: the Apostles' Creed (Western in origin) and the Nicene Creed (Asia/African in origin depending where you place the very influential Egypt). Contestations about the Creeds, the meaning, order and relationship between their clauses, and the context of their creation are still being fought among Patristic scholars – and each Creed took centuries to gain acceptance. However, the Creeds stand as ecumenically agreed digests of the Christian Biblical faith – and that is why they became and remain foundational for any sense of Christianity.

Then there are a long line of pre- and post-Nicene figures – from Tertullian and Augustine, to Luther and Rahner. These make up traditions of Christian reflection (which are, again, not at all homogeneous). As the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, and the theologian Rowan Williams have pointed out: traditions are inventions.¹⁶ We must always remember two things about past examples – the Creeds apart. One: they are in the past not the present – not written as universal blueprints for what

16 See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and Rowan Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

is the case, but located answers to located question in located situations. In addition, two: we handle our interpretations of those examples, not the examples as churches or the theologians understood them then. However, borrowing and learning *from* is not the same as being dependent *upon*; there is a thinking *through* and *beyond*. My theology, for example, can learn from but it cannot rehearse Moltmann's. I do not live in post-Holocaust Germany, so my Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, doctrine of God and even construal of salvation cannot issue from Moltmann's highly particular social, historical and linguistic context. To rehearse his ideas, for me, would be a cerebral exercise, abstract and universalizing – theology as a glass-bead game. I do not live with his questions. There is also a need to get over the fear of contamination and syncretism; a need to stop believing in some theological purism. We are treating mysteries here and we are, as St. Paul recognized, stewards of such mysteries. There is no pure theology, and *pace* Barth we should not be remotely thinking that is our theological goal.

The second step, the contestation of the colonized, is an act of transplantation – which is an act, as I said, of translation. This is important to understand. Translation is always one of the first acts of colonialism; it possesses by reimagining the strange and foreign in terms of the familiar, the motherland. It is not simply that something is lost in the translation; something is erased. Often colonialism attempted to erase other mother tongues, chasing the utopian dream of homogenization so the 'outpost' can be recognized as a geographical extension of the homeland. There are accounts of people being punished and alienated if they did not use the mother tongue of the colonials – French, Portuguese, English, Dutch, for example. This is wa Thiong'o writing about Kenya: 'Learning, for a colonial child, become a cerebral activity and not an emotional felt experience ... The language of conceptualization was foreign. Thought, in him, took the visible form of a foreign language... This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility.'¹⁷ He calls this 'colonial alienation'. Gayatri Spivak, writing about India, uses the term 'epistemic violence'.¹⁸ By this she means, colonization becomes

17 *Decolonizing the Mind*, p. 17.

18 Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–315.

not just as an historical act whereby one people is subjugated to another, more powerful people, but as an imaginative act that changes the way people come to think about, articulate and experience the world in which they live, or have come to live. It starts to forge a new collective memory, a new mentality, such that it becomes difficult and strange to think outside the box, outside of the categories that have been handed down and taught as normative, as universal. I think this strangeness and difficulty becomes even more pronounced within such intellectual disciplines that have strong notions of the ‘tradition’, ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘canon’; disciplines that because of these strong notions are inherently conservative. Like theology, for example.

I will return to that conservatism in my closing remarks; for now I hope it is evident that if decolonization doesn’t engage in acts of translation and transplantation, then, as wa Thiong’o points out: the location of the ‘great mirror of the imagination’ remains ‘European and its history and culture and the rest of the universe [is] seen from that center.’¹⁹ For wa Thiong’o, as for Fanon, language is the carrier of culture, ‘and culture carries ... the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves.’²⁰ It is in the translation and transplantation that the contestation with colonial hegemony is conducted. *How* it is conducted depends upon *how* we understand the composition and evolution of cultures themselves.

There is model for cultural composition and change that is entirely misguided and leads to contestations in which ‘reversal’ rather than translation rules. I will explain because I think from my own experience of being in South Africa and visiting South Africa over two decades, this is crucial. The ‘reversal’ model of decolonization is rather like Bultmann’s programme for demythologization: peeling away the colonial layers to get at the precolonial kernel of the kerygma; often in terms of an original language of the people. This model is deeply naïve about the way cultures operate and change and the kind of people at the vanguard of such operations. As Chakrabarty has to own his own colonial education, so Fanon will speak of ‘the zebra striping of my mind’.²¹ The ‘reversal’ model owes much to Marx’s

19 *Decolonizing the Mind*, p. 18.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

21 *Black Skin White Masks*, p. 45.

distinction between the superstructure (laws, policies, and the institutions disseminating and socializing them etc.) and the substructure (the people, its labour and its production). This model won't work because the social and the cultural in terms of relations, values, thought, imagination and language are more complex than any simple layering of reality. It may have worked in the past when a Manichaean reality pitted colonial against native. However, I doubt it when I look at Algeria, say, or Kenya. The histories of countries are far, far more complex than any revolutionary process. In South Africa, there are many crosscurrents in its formation. No doubt, there was an original people or people: the Khoi and the San. However, the dominant voices in the country's early formation were both colonizing the Xhosa from the north and east; the *Voortrekkers* from the south.²² The revolutionary change in a 'reversal' model of decolonization is an event with dramatic consequences. However, it is never a clean, irruptive break between past and present. Deep historical continuities will remain and in the post-revolutionary culture, these continuities will have to be negotiated and rewoven into the entire history, memory and identity of the country. For it is in the acceptance of the various histories and socialities of a country that the identity of its national belonging lies.

The new South African constitution provided something of a *tabula rasa* for a new future. True, *tabula rasas* are never as clean as we might wish they could be; fights for freedom, justice and equal access to opportunities continue from the past into the present. However, it would seem to me South Africa is much further down the line from that decolonizing event of reversal that provided the space for a new constitution. The decolonization now is concerned with mental habits that have been internalized and where the West retains spectres of superiority – most notably in education. (In addition, I will return to education in a moment.) Alternatively, where, following global trends that characterize themselves as universal destinies and prerequisites for advancement, decolonization is actually creating new cultural and social colonialisms in the name of many-headed Empire based on capital wealth and military might.

22 See Noël Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992).

To decolonize habits of mind, sensibility, and ways of feeling, experiencing and valuing, is a long process. Peeling away layers will not help because eventually, as with demythologization, you have nothing. Cultures are not layered like cakes so you can skim off the cream or icing and arrive at the real substance of what is South African. The sheer complexity of mother tongues and their histories in this country make such a model of decolonization impossible. However, in that impossibility lies a certain truth about cultural conditions: they are vast, complex, multidimensional networks of interactive parts. They are composed of ever-shifting discourses, artefacts, institutions, languages, histories (among many other entities), and people who live and internalize these networks as ways of making sense of what they experience. They are never homogenous – that is a colonial fantasy; a fantasy profoundly entwined with notions of dominion and sovereignty: a fantasy then about power. The decolonization model I am proposing then involves reshaping and bending these vast and complex, multidimensional networks in a way that best serves to make sense in a South African context to multilingual, multicultural South Africans. The extent to which there can even be a Pan-African approach to decolonization is ambivalent. The feel and sensibility of being here, with your histories, is very different to me from the feel and sensibility I have of being in Nigeria, say, or Tunisia, Egypt, Ethiopia. There may well be some common themes and even oppressions, but they will be experienced differently because what went on here and goes on here, the languages used to express it, the histories with which those languages are interwoven, the institutions established to disseminate and reflect upon it, the ways people work and the ways people think – none of them are continental. They are South African. That is not nationalism, or it does not need to be nationalism if we are critically sensitive to nationalist ideologies (imported from the West). Cultures are as basic as geographies, climates, animal life and cultivation at its most primary level; a cultivation that nurtures those who belong and understand themselves as belonging. In *that* there is some rich politics, I admit: there are mythologies about ‘land’, ‘family’, and ‘property’ that are as deep as they are multifaceted.²³ Then decolonization is and always will be a profoundly political project.

23 The Afrikaner novelist and historian Karel Schoeman has made me aware of some of these mythologies.

On my model, decolonization is not then about peeling away layers of Western influence most importantly Western languages. As Chakrabarty observes in the citation above: all our concepts of ‘citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, and scientific rationality ... bear the burden of European thought and history.’ In fact, the ‘reversal’ model is itself a colonial act – because it is thoroughly akin to logic of getting back to some raw and naked precolonial state. This is the logic of modernity itself with its myth of the new order of Enlightenment that puts the old dark ages aside. The past cannot be erased, however traumatic; it has to be worked through. For a number of years now the major prizes for English literature have gone to writers who have taken the language as their own and done something new with it: writers from the West Indies, from India, and from South Africa, writing in their own idiom about their own cultures. To employ a phrase Jean-Paul Sartre used with respect to French used by Frantz Fanon: he ‘bends the language to new requirements.’²⁴ That is translation and transplantation. What ‘reversal’ ends up doing is imposing a new colonialism. As Bultmann did when he peeled back the obscurantism and prescientific understanding of the New Testament culture in order to impose his own rationalized model of what the true *kerygma* consisted of. As with every other country and national culture, there is no prepolitical, prehistorical, presocialized South Africa that could ever be returned to, and trying to return to it in the attempt of attaining some South Africa’s essential identity is a dangerous mirage. It will replace one colonialism with another, and employing the language of ‘our freedom’ simply becomes another violent act of what essentially is *ressentiment*. Questions will subsequently arise, such as: Who are the newly oppressed? Who are the newly marginalized? Scraping away colonial surfaces to reach some South African bedrock is a deeply colonial project that simply replicates, albeit in a different fashion, colonial mentality. Cultures are like eco-systems – they are complex, ever-shifting sets of intricate relations with unspoken rules concerning agreed and dissenting values and behaviours and unacknowledged values and behaviours. They

24 Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Preface’ to *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 9.

are not unrelated to eco-systems because climate, the land and its use, and the passage of time affect them.

The third and final step in decolonization, following the contestation, is affirmation. The affirmation arises from a recognition²⁵: that this is our culture, reflective of the diversity of peoples and their experiences of being here in this place, with these histories, politics, economies, socialities, solidarities and values. To my own mind, whatever the country, affirmation is a benchmark condition – something aimed at and continually struggled for as circumstances change globally and locally: a culture that we identify as our own, expressive of who ‘we’ are. I have put that ‘we’ in inverted commas, because such a cultural self-identification at a national level will be continually struggled for *because* that ‘we’ will always remain a question of who it includes and who it does not. In addition, again to my mind, it should always remain a question because it is the foundation of the political and a nation plays an important role in being ‘host to’ and ‘hospitable to’ the other.

In my closing remarks let me return to ‘theology’ and three challenges it faces in this decolonizing process. Each are complicated and I can only sketch at this point. The first challenge arises from the history of the relationship between Christian mission and colonization. The impact of that relationship is a considerable mixed bag – education and literacy have to be weighed alongside indoctrination and racism; patronizing at best, oppressive at worse. There is no getting round that history – though there would be neither the Bikos nor Mandelas without it. What still, though, has to be thought through is the way certain remarks by Christ at the end of Matthew’s gospel – ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations’ (28.19) – have been read as a mandate for universal, cultural conquest. The challenge then is to think and do better theology based on those Biblical texts and to resist the aggressive and opportunistic grabbing of people’s hearts and minds that too many read into them. Fundamentally, it will mean thinking

25 We might, after Hegel, say ‘recognition’ more abstractly. On the politics of ‘recognition’ and its Hegelian roots see Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, various translators (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); and Nancy Fraser and Alex Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003).

through what ‘discipleship’, the politics of Jesus and the nature of the church with respect to the world. What we do know is Matthew’s ‘nations’ is ἐθνη (peoples). It is not “world” as some translations have it and it is not ‘nation-state’ in any modern sense. Nor, in the Greek, is there a possessive genitive ‘of’, and ‘make disciples’ is one verb meaning ‘you disciple’ – i.e. let your following and discipleship disciple others.

The second and much more radical challenge for the decolonization of theology lies in its conservative understanding of ‘tradition’. In addition, I use ‘conservative’ there with all its resonances, especially ‘to conserve’. Tradition is not about seeking to conserve or preserve in amber. The very etymology of the word in both Greek and Latin means ‘to hand on’. Therefore, ‘tradition’ is orientated towards the future not the past. It is not about the conservation of certain forms of collective memory. The ecclesial act of ‘conservation’ will end up with churches and cathedrals becoming living museums, cultural archives, and centres for tourism – and this is what many of them have become in Europe. The ecclesial act of conservation would be a profound betrayal of a living gospel preached by a living body of Christ. There are riches for decolonization *in* the Christian traditions, and I use the plural because there are many, and they are not homogenous. The singleness of Tradition with a capital ‘t’ lies in its faithful witness to the ongoing work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in its various embedded locations, cultures and histories. In addition, the Christian traditions have never been just Western.

The third challenge comes from the academy and our educational systems. Chakrabarty avers: “Europe” [as an imaginary figure] cannot after all be provincialized within the institutional site of the university whose knowledge protocols will always take us back to the terrain where all contours follow that of any hyperreal Europe.²⁶ However, we have to recognize that for theology the challenge of the academy is much weaker than is sometimes supposed. Theological reflection, faith-seeking understanding was nor is today born of a purely intellectual pursuit. The academy, like the *studia* of the ecclesial elites in the past, has always been a troubled location for theological development. Formation – which is

26 *Provincializing Europe*, p. 45.

what theology has to inform – goes on in the world and in the churches in the world. It is a key aspect in discipleship. The challenge today for the professional and teaching theologian like myself in the academy lies in the fact that universities aspire to be internationally important in the dissemination of universal knowledge. In addition, academics absorb that ambition so that even the aspiration of academic Christian theologians is to have their name in AAR floodlights. I do not believe – I cannot believe – those academics have sold out; but we are certainly owned. What we can do is facilitate; nurturing and educating congregations of lay theologians. Lay, that is, with respect to ecclesial corporations and hierarchies; because the church elites cannot lead the decolonizing process either. Putting aside their own internal politicking, in the main this is because they do not see the world as most of their congregations experience it.

That necessary attention to lay experience and lay education – that needs to develop a broader curriculum of the best theological voices (Black, White and Coloured, in Xhosa, Afrikaans and English) does not mean the emphasis is simply on practical and public theology, leaving the more abstract systematic, Biblical and philosophical theology to the more intellectual, Westernized institutions. Decolonizing theology does not mean South Africa simply looks to its own public issues with an open Bible. There has been an important shift away from that class division between the practical and the theoretical in the way theology is done, and that needs to have better institutionalization. Under sheer economic pressure, British Faculties of Theology are realizing that we need to stop the silo mentality in Faculties of theology that tears apart different approaches to theology and, in past, put the people with lower academic achievement to do the practical work while the elites could do the sophisticated thinking and ‘real’ scholarship. Theology is interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary, and we need to foster that among our students. There is no reason why there cannot be distinctive South African systematic theologies and philosophical theologies – distinctive Christologies, pneumatologies and ecclesiologies. That would be the hallmark of confidence in your own ability to be public intellectuals on your own terms – rather than handmaids adopting and adapting Western models of public intellectualism; a hallmark of that third step, affirmation. For doctrine is rooted in living. It comes from below, not above. Now I am saying that to ecumenical leaders in Europe – on

Anglican-Roman Catholic debates, for example. For congregations are not needing the hierarchies to settle the debates – about women's ordination or homosexuality, for example. The ecumenical movement is flagging in momentum at the top, among the church leaders; it is alive, well and flourishing on the street level. Eventually, the leaders will have to catch up. The theological is lived out among ordinary Christians and currently it is well in advance ecumenically. In fact, it is setting the pace. That has always been where the hope of the church lies – with Christians, the majority of them lay, living faithful lives in the complex pluralities of everyday life. Similarly, the decolonization of theology is also taking place already here. It is the academy and educational systems that frequently has to humble itself to listen, learn and become informed.

Universities began by developing special centres of expertise: Salerno for medicine, Bologna for law, Paris for philosophy, and Oxford for experimental science. The modern university is an invention made in Berlin in the early nineteenth century predicated on universal reason; as much as the carving up of Africa by a meeting of European nations in Berlin, in 1884, was in accord with Enlightenment colonial rationalism. There need to be centres of excellence for studies of what is culturally indigenous, and international intellectual exchanges that can appreciate more clearly, how the concepts and models we use in one place have different nuances and content when worked with in another place. The physical sciences may be different here, but certainly not the humanities and social sciences. This would help to foster a 'decolonization' in which exchanges were genuine, respectful and egalitarian; cultivating national confidence in scholarship. It would also, fundamentally, develop more complex models of universal knowledge in the social sciences and humanities.

What this will affect internationally – and it is so needed – is the provincializing of the West, particularly Europe that I spoke of at the beginning of this lecture. The West can no longer afford its colonial and hegemonic reputation; and it can no longer sustain it. When I look at the makeshift housing in some of your townships, around Masiphumelele, for example, and I hear of their protests for proper and adequate civic amenities – yes, I think, their struggle is important. In addition, with the next thought I think of the makeshift housing in the slums and no-go areas on my own country. They exist and they are getting larger, and we do not

have your kinder climatic conditions, which enables people to survive in such conditions more easily. As a Curate in a church in Bristol one very cold winter, I came to know first-hand that people froze to death on the streets. This is not just your problem, just as the raping of women, police and government corruption, the flagrant abuse of human rights, and organized crime are not just your problem. Europe cannot instruct or dictate here. It has exactly these issues on its own doorstep and has had for many years. For every Derrida who made it in the *Académie française* there is a million Algerian others who didn't and live in abject poverty in France; for every Sadiq Khan who becomes Lord Mayor of London there are any number of disenfranchised Muslims to have no voice in the country, particularly women. Europe has no superiority to promote; no symbolic capital to lend – and if and when it does then it is posturing. Its stock is waning and international power is elsewhere. For the global, ex-colonial powers to retain their colonial mentalities and sensibilities. It is only the form of empire building that has changed; it is now internationally rapacious but the goals are the same: winning hearts and minds for efficient asset stripping. I was asked in a private conversation quite recently, 'How is South Africa viewed by Europe?' I can see where that question comes from – every country is looking for economic investment and the favour of the G7, the World Bank and the IMF is important in attracting it. Although, apparently I am told that South African Banks are sitting on great quantities of liquidity that is not being invested. However, it has to be recognized also that the question I was asked is rooted deep in a colonial past (that is over) and a colonial way of thinking (that continues). The question, to my mind, is how do you view yourselves?

A closing paragraph for a lecture that has already been too long; but I have not mentioned Steve de Gruchy yet, in honour of who this lecture has been established. That was purposeful. I did not know Steve, and I do not wish to be presumptuous. I have, though, been reading some of the theological work that Steve produced and it reads to me like a theologian establishing a programme for decolonizing theology. Let me rehearse, briefly, three emphases in that programme: It has to be lay led. It has to be Biblically based. It has to be contextual. These emphases will form the basis, as he

concludes, for a sustained [and that's an important word] development of an African theology.²⁷ And I think that is right.

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27 Cf., for instance, 'Doing theology in Africa needs a continued discussion,' in Steve De Gruchy, *Changing Frontiers: The Mission Story of the UCCSA* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1991), p. 277.

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